

Missouri power players join forces in effort to keep spy agency within St. Louis' borders



10 HOURS AGO • BY NICHOLAS J.C. PISTOR

ST. LOUIS • A tandem of state and local power players appeared in St. Louis on Thursday as part of a sprawling effort to convince the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency to stay within the city's borders.

The top-secret agency, which is seeking to replace its aging facility at the site of the old St. Louis Arsenal south of downtown, is holding public information sessions for the four sites battling to house a new \$1.6 billion replacement facility.

Thursday's session at the St. Louis Gateway Classic Sports Foundation was packed with officials pleading with the federal government to move the location just north of the old Pruitt Igoe housing complex.

Gov. Jay Nixon, who is recovering from knee surgery, appeared at the event while walking with a cane alongside St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay, U.S. Rep. William Lacy Clay, several state senators and representatives and former U.S. Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond.

"I can't remember the last time we had this many elected officials from various levels together supporting the same cause," Slay said.

Nixon, in brief remarks, called NGA an asset to St. Louis with a highly skilled workforce.

"We wouldn't have caught bin Laden without them," Nixon said.

NGA handles mapping support for defense agencies. The agency, which has significantly grown since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, played a pivotal role in the hunt for Osama bin Laden, as well as doing major work during wars and natural disasters. It currently employs about 3,000 people at its location south of the Anheuser-Busch brewery.

City officials say losing the agency would be devastating to the St. Louis tax base.

Three other sites are vying to house the complex: Fenton (the site of the old Chrysler plant along Interstate 44); the Mehlville area (at the Met Life facility on Tesson Ferry Road, between Interstate 270 and Highway 141); and St. Clair County (adjacent to Scott Air Force Base along Interstate 64 in Illinois).

The St. Louis County sites haven't been considered major contenders, although NGA officials said on Thursday all four sites are still being reviewed. County Executive Steve Stenger has endorsed the city's location and appeared at Thursday's meeting in support of it.

"The county doesn't view its neighbors as competitors," Stenger said. "It's really important that it remains in St. Louis city."

St. Clair County has been seen as the city's biggest competitor. It has offered free land to the federal government near Scott Air Force Base. The county held a similar session with the NGA on Wednesday night. The event drew about 200 people but didn't include an appearance from the state's governor.

The relocation has set off a battle between Missouri and Illinois politicians for the new facility. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill, who grew up in East St. Louis, has been a major force in St. Clair County's efforts.

The decision, which is expected in March 2016, will be made in Washington. The stakes are high. The decision will come just a few months before the 2016 primaries and general election, and about a year before the 2017 St. Louis mayoral election.

Clay, the St. Louis congressman whose district houses the agency, announced on Thursday that he had secured the endorsement of Missouri's entire congressional delegation for the St. Louis site.

"This is a competition," Clay said. "It's important that we present a unified front to NGA."

David Berczek, the chief of public affairs for NGA West, said Thursday's meeting had a strong turnout, noting the heavy presence of top state officials.

"It's good that they are out there showing their support," Berczek said.

Keeping the agency in an urban location has been a tough task. While St. Clair County has offered undeveloped farm land, the city has struggled to put together a clean site large enough for such a massive development. The city has deployed a complicated real estate strategy involving everything from the controversial eminent domain to physically moving houses to new locations.

The city has been unable to reach an agreement with about a dozen property owners within the site just north of downtown. Some of them appeared on Thursday asking the federal government to stay away from their neighborhood.

LePorter Mixon said she would be forced to move if NGA selected the north St. Louis site. "I think it's horrible because they already have locations that don't have any houses on them," Mixon said. "Why choose this one?"

Mixon said the city isn't offering enough money for her to move to a new house without getting a mortgage.

"That's not my idea of living," Mixon said.

The NGA took feedback on Thursday only from written comment cards.

About 40 percent of the 100-acre zone is owned by business entities of developer Paul McKee. The city once owned some of those properties before selling them to McKee for his NorthSide Regeneration project.

City officials recently filed a list of properties that are subject to eminent domain if the city wins the project.

McKee was present at Thursday's meeting. His properties are included on the eminent domain list, but he is negotiating with the city on a sale price. Both he and the city say negotiations are progressing.

Still, Mary Ellen Ponder, Slay's chief of staff, said on Thursday no deal is in place and eminent domain remains a possibility for those properties.